DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 406 740 EA 028 305

AUTHOR	Gaustad, Joan
TITLE	Nongraded Primary Education.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, Eugene, Oreg.; National Association of Elementary School Principals, Alexandria, VA.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	92
NOTE	5p.
CONTRACT	RR93002006
AVAILABLE FROM	Educational Products, National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1615 Duke Street, Alexandria, VA 22314-3483 ($2.50; quantity discounts).
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022) -- ERIC Publications (071) -- Reference Materials - Bibliographies (131)
JOURNAL CIT	Research Roundup; v9 n1 Fall 1992
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; *Age Grade Placement; Educational Research; *Grouping (Instructional Purposes); *Mixed Age Grouping; *Nongraded Instructional Grouping; Nontraditional Education; Open Education; *Primary Education

ABSTRACT

Nongraded education is the practice of teaching children of different ages and ability levels together, without dividing them into groups labeled by grade designations. As the year 2000 approaches and schools are being re-evaluated in light of changing social and economic conditions, nongradedness is the focus of renewed interest. This publication contains an annotated bibliography of six pieces of research literature on nongraded elementary education: (1) "The Nongraded Elementary School" (John I. Goodlad and Robert H. Anderson); (2) "Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8" (National Association for the Education of Young Children); (3) "The Case for Mixed-Age Grouping in Early Education" (Lilian G. Katz, and others); (4) "Supporting Learning: Understanding and Assessing the Progress of Children in the Primary Program: A Resource for Parents and Teachers" (Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia); (5) "Nongraded Education: Mixed-age, Integrated, and Developmentally Appropriate Education for Primary Children" (Joan Gaustad); and (6) "Making the Transition to Nongraded Primary Education" (Joan Gaustad). (LMI)

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VOLUME 9, NUMBER 1

FALL 1992

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Research ROUNDUP

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

ED 406 740

Nongraded Primary Education

Joan Gaustad

Nongraded education is the practice of teaching children of different ages and ability levels together, without dividing them into groups labeled by grade designations. Although nongraded education can be used with all ages, it is particularly appropriate during the primary years, when developmental differences are greatest. Children move from easier to more difficult material at their own varying rates of speed, making continuous progress rather than being promoted once per year. Curriculum and teaching practices are developmentally appropriate, and an integrated curriculum seeks to foster children's physical, social, and emotional growth along with their intellectual growth.

Flexible grouping is a key element of nongraded education. Students are grouped homogeneously by achievement for some subjects, such as math and reading. For other subjects, children usually learn in heterogenous groups. At different times they may work independently, in pairs, or in groups formed for specific purposes and then disbanded. Various names have been used to describe this approach, including *mixed-age grouping* and *heterogenous grouping*.

Many experimental nongraded programs and closely related *open education* programs were tried in the sixties and early seventies. However, most of these failed due to inadequate understanding, lack of administrative and community support, and poorly planned implementation.

Now, as the year 2000 approaches and schools are being re-evaluated in light of changing social and economic conditions, nongradedness is the focus of renewed interest. Nongraded primary education, supported by decades of research and refined by the study of successful programs, has been mandated in British Columbia and Kentucky, is under consideration in Oregon, and is being explored in many schools and districts—although alternate terminology is sometimes used to avoid negative associations with earlier, unsuccessful programs. It is certainly an appropriate time to review the research literature on the subject.

John I. Goodlad and Robert H. Anderson stimulated extensive research and the implementation of thousands of nongraded programs across the nation as co-authors of *The Nongraded Elementary School*, first published in 1959. Reissued with a new introduction in 1987, the book remains the classic work defining nongraded primary education and arguing for its superiority over graded education.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children summarizes current knowledge of child development and describes appropriate teaching practices for primary-age children in its 1987 position statement, edited by Sue Bredekamp. Its list of recommended developmentally appropriate practices closely matches the components of nongraded education.

Lilian G. Katz, director of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, is a tireless promoter of mixed-age grouping. In a comprehensive review of relevant research, she and her colleagues establish the social and cognitive benefits of mixed-age grouping for both older and younger children.

The Ministry of Education of British Columbia,

Joan Gaustad is a research analyst and writer for the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management at the University of Oregon.

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in a resource document for teachers and parents, explains assessment and evaluation practices used in the province's new nongraded primary program, and reviews the supporting research on child development and learning.

Joan Gaustad, in a two-part series for the Oregon School Study Council, defines nongraded education, reviews its research base, describes how a nongraded primary classroom functions, and explores the process of transition between graded and nongraded organization at the local and state level.

Goodlad, John I., and Anderson, Robert H. **The Nongraded Elementary School**, Revised Edition. New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1987. 248 pages.

Goodlad and Anderson present achievement data demonstrating that children entering first grade can vary in mental age by up to four years, that the amount of variation increases as students progress through subsequent grades, and that achievement patterns of individual children differ greatly among subject areas. They argue against "procrustean" attempts to force all children of the same chronological age to fit narrowly defined grade norms.

Questioning the effectiveness of nonpromotion in reducing achievement discrepancies, they present evidence showing that this policy affects most children even more negatively than the unsatisfactory alternative of social promotion.

Age-graded instruction originated in the mid-1800s, when the new idea of mass public education created the need for an efficient, economical system capable of handling large numbers of students. Goodlad and Anderson place grading and nongrading in a historical perspective and discuss the evolution of the modern nongraded model, including its relationship to modern theories of curriculum development.

They describe the operation of nongraded schools, devoting an entire chapter to the reporting of student progress, and discuss the emotional consequences of graded and nongraded expectations.

The book's final chapters examine the process of establishing a nongraded school and the factors that commonly impede or facilitate the process. The authors draw on the reports of program participants to cite the problems and rewards of nongrading. Goodlad and Anderson also analyze the underlying causes of common implementation problems and suggest directions for further research and development.

The introduction to the revised edition reviews historical and theoretical developments in nongrading since the publication of the first edition, and presents a set of 36 principles of nongradedness developed by fellow researcher Barbara Pavan. These principles explicitly state the assumptions on which nongrading is based, and describe the educational goals, the administrative-organizational framework, and the operational elements, including materials, curriculum, teaching methods, and evaluation.

A new book by Anderson and Pavan, *Nongradedness: Helping It to Happen*, is scheduled for publication by Technomic Press this year.

National Association for the Education of Young Children. **Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8**. Sue Bredekamp, editor. Washington, D.C.: The Association, 1987. 92 pages.

Concerned about the use of instructional practices which are inappropriate and harmful to young children, the NAEYC prepared this document as a decision-making guide for educators and parents.

Research has established that children aged 5-8 are cognitively unready to learn abstractly. While they are beginning to use symbols, they still need concrete reference points. They "construct" knowledge from personal experience and absorb information in meaningful contexts more easily than they learn unconnected facts. Young children need to practice developing physical skills, and they actually become more fatigued by long periods of sitting than by running and jumping.

Children's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development are interrelated. Successful peer interaction, physical coordination, emotional self-control, and following rules are goals as important for young children to master as reading, writing, and calculating. Normal children are eager to master new skills, and confident that they can do so. But even normal children vary enormously in learning

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About ERIC

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This publication was prepared by the Clearinghouse with funding from OERI, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. OERI-R-188062004. No federal funds were used in the printing of this publication.

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style, personality, and rate of development. When rigid expectations exceed their current capabilities, failure may damage both their self-esteem and their motivation to learn.

The NAEYC emphasizes that teachers must teach the "whole child," supporting intellectual, social, emotional, and moral growth. A wide variety of teaching methods and materials should be used to accommodate individual differences as well as those resulting from varied cultural and family backgrounds. Expectations of when specific goals should be mastered must be flexible.

The NAEYC strongly recommends curriculum integration, with lessons that actively involve children both physically and cognitively. While participating in interesting group projects, children can simultaneously learn factual information, writing, and calculating as they practice physical, social, and communication skills.

A lengthy chart describes and compares specific examples of appropriate and inappropriate instructional practices for primary-age children. The chart addresses such components as curriculum goals, teaching strategies, integrated curriculums, guidance of social and emotional development, and program evaluation.

Katz, Lilian G., and others. **The Case for Mixed-Age Grouping in Early Education**. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1990. 59 pages.

Mixed-age grouping, defined here as "placing children who are at least a year apart in age into the same classroom groups," recreates a pattern common throughout human history, in which children of diverse ages learn together and from one another in family, village, and neighborhood settings.

Research has found that, even though children tend to spontaneously form mixed-age play groups, adults in our society typically segregate children by age. Trends toward smaller families, and increased reliance on preschools and childcare centers, further reduce opportunities for cross-age interaction.

Cooperation is fostered in mixed-age groups by the different expectations children have of those older and younger than themselves. Younger children are perceived as needing assistance, older children as sources of help and leadership. As a result, cooperative and prosocial behaviors increase in mixed-age groups, while discipline problems decrease.

Mixed-age grouping offers social and emotional benefits for both older and younger children. Older children practice leadership skills while taking a greater role in directing and organizing play. Younger children, in addition to being able to join in more complex play than they could initiate themselves, grow socially by interacting with more mature playmates. At the same time, insecure older children may improve their social skills by interacting with younger, less threatening classmates.

Mixed-age grouping also offers less advanced students opportunities to learn from more advanced classmates as well as from the teacher. Studies show that younger children master more advanced problem-solving skills when grouped with older children. Peer-tutoring research finds that both tutors and the tutored benefit academically from their interaction, and that the tutors' self-confidence and attitudes toward school improve.

Katz and her colleagues note the need for further research to establish the optimum age range, the best ratio of older to younger children, and the best proportion of school time to be spent in mixed-age grouping. An appendix suggests specific teaching strategies to support and encourage social, emotional, and intellectual development in mixed-age classes.

Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia. **Supporting Learning: Understanding and Assessing the Progress of Children in the Primary Program. A Resource for Parents and Teachers.** Victoria, British Columbia, Canada: The Ministry, 1991. 62 pages.

Written as a resource for British Columbia's new nongraded primary program, this document emphasizes that reporting student progress is not a one-way process, school to home. Teachers and parents are partners in educating children, and information needs to be shared in both directions.

To provide a context for assessment, the ministry summarizes knowledge about human development and learning, then describes and explains the evaluation and reporting practices to be used.

The three sources of information about children's progress are listed as *Observation of Process*, *Observation of Product*, and *Conversations and Conferences*. Teachers are asked to regularly record their observations of children in action, to collect samples of children's work, and to have frequent informal conferences with children in order to discover how they feel about their progress and any problems they may be having. Teachers periodically share their observations with parents in telephone conversations and during formal conferences.

To give teachers and parents a frame of reference in which to judge student progress, the ministry lists *Widely Held Expectations* for development in physical, social, emotional, intellectual, and artistic ar-

eas, as well as in the specific curriculum areas of mathematics and reading. Charts describe the behaviors, skills, and concepts children usually master within certain age ranges, rather than listing specific achievements expected at specific ages.

The document concludes by suggesting specific actions and activities parents can use at home to support their children's learning in each of the listed areas.

Gaustad, Joan. **Nongraded Education: Mixed-age, Integrated, and Developmentally Appropriate Education for Primary Children.** *Oregon School Study Council Bulletin* 35:7 (March 1992). 38 pages.
Making the Transition to Nongraded Primary Education. *Oregon School Study Council Bulletin* 35:8 (April 1992). 41 pages.

Gaustad begins this two-part series by surveying the history of graded and nongraded education in the United States, and discussing the reasons why the "first wave" of nongrading failed. She then reviews research supporting nongraded primary education, and describes its components in practice.

The second bulletin summarizes the elements of successful change. Shirley M. Hord and others find that innovations often fail because policy makers underestimate how long change will take, and the amount of training and support teachers will require. Realistically, full implementation of a major innovation requires several years.

Studies of nongraded programs show that understanding and support by teachers and parents are crucial to success, and that both groups are more likely to support nongrading when they are involved in decision making. In addition, teachers need practical training, including opportunities to observe effective models. Nongrading also requires more ongoing planning time than graded education.

Gaustad next examines the transition process as it is currently occurring in British Columbia, Kentucky, and Oregon. Educators who were interviewed agreed that individual schools—and individual teachers—should be allowed considerable flexibility as to when and how to implement nongrading.

Like their students, teachers differ in their rates and patterns of learning. Changing from graded to nongraded education not only involves multiple innovations, but requires a basic change in educational philosophy that often clashes with deeply ingrained expectations. Fortunately, components of nongrading can be effectively combined in many ways to suit individual teaching styles, and introducing components one at a time is easier than attempting to change everything at once.

The series concludes with a discussion of ways by which school boards can support and encourage nongrading. □

Research Roundup is published three times during the school year by the National Association of Elementary School Principals. Single copies: $2.50; bulk orders (10 or more): $2.00 ea. Virginia residents add 4.5% sales tax. Specify date and title of issue when ordering. Checks payable to NAESP must accompany order. Send to Educational Products, NAESP, 1615 Duke Street, Alexandria, Virginia 22314-3483.

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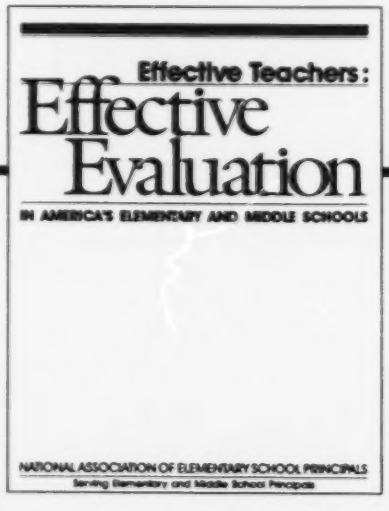
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